Review: Miriam Berg, *Turkish Drama Serials: The Importance and Influence of a Globally Popular Television Phenomenon*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2023.

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Turkey is rarely focussed on in the ecosystem of global media production but, in Dr. Miriam Berg's hands, it is almost impossible to imagine why. British audiences may be most familiar with Turkey as a 'liminal' country 'caught between the East and the West' (Zarakol, 2022: 5), whose image during the Brexit campaign was abused through dog-whistle fears over non-Western migration. Berg's expansive study of *Turkish Drama Serials* does not shy away from countering such narratives and considering the political implications of representation. But her rigorous political account of Turkey as a geo-cultural 'work in progress', in which Arab countries see themselves through Turkey's idiosyncrasies, is done with great hope. Hope for how popular entertainment can positively influence the image of Muslim life poorly portrayed in Western productions, and for uniting the everyday audience experiences of her seemingly disparate cases of Chile, Israel and Qatar.

Berg's protagonist is both Turkey – as the cultivator of a unique form of modernity and the second largest exporter of scripted TV dramas in the world – and the medium of Turkish serial dramas themselves. The text deftly takes us from the Turkish Television Industry (Chapter 1), through the reception and influence of Turkish serial dramas on the Arab world and women viewers in Qatar (Chapters 2-5), to Chile (Chapter 6), and to Israel (Chapter 7). Some of the work is already available in Berg's publications, but there is no substitute for the more expansive thematic discussions she can host in the space of this monograph. Her theoretical framing includes cultural and genre proximity, lifeworld, and a 'uses and gratifications' approach. The theory of soft-power is the most finely woven into the text; in the context of the latest, devastating flare-up of Israeli-Arab relations in the latter part of 2023, Berg's work resounds beyond the walls of audience and reception studies.

Authors in *Participations* have previously asked: 'How can we account for the role of the media in people's lives, without understanding how those lives are lived, in specific times and in specific places?' (Turnbull, 2017). Berg tackles this dilemma through multi-sited analyses, clearly influencing a movement analysing Turkish serial dramas across the world,

from Bulgaria (Celikkol and Kraidy, 2023) to Sweden (Rahte, 2023), to Mexico (Baran, 2023). The dramas are treated as 'multi-layered textual spaces' (Berg, 2023: 194) that defy the conventional wisdom that content from a Muslim-majority country cannot easily transcend its linguistic and cultural reality. Berg investigates many different entry points, employing interviews, online surveys and focus groups from the MENA and LAC regions (countries with good relations with Turkey in the 2000s) and from Israel (which did not). Yet there is something about the analytical precision of this 'audience-centric approach' which can leave us divorced from the visceral and emotional reality of *why* these dramas have had such dramatic impact. Whilst Berg occasionally compares the phenomenon to other genres and moments of cultural influence (e.g. Turkey's Eurovision win in 2003), her methodology is quick to categorise her interviewees' emotional responses into higher-order viewing categories. This prompts a question highly relevant to the *Perceptions* disciplines: how much should the reception of film be analysed in relation to aesthetics and dramaturgy, versus dispassionately detailing audience responses? (As the reviewer of Berg's book, I was surprised not to find myself more drawn-in and emotionally motivated to actually *watch* these dramas at the end!) Berg focusses less of conjuring the dramatic charm of the dramas in our minds using description, focussing instead on their broader social significance, but this is a trade-off that misses an opportunity for her work to percolate in the mind for longer.

Notwithstanding this slight emotional distance, Berg's perceptiveness around her audience is highly attentive to the hybridity of viewers' ideologies and how popular serial dramas pique them. The dramas themselves often 'appear liberal on the surface' (Berg, 2023: 21) in terms of storylines and aesthetics, such as the more Western dressing of female characters. Yet, they are also able to visualise what Tahralı et al. (2023) calls an 'alternative "Turkish" modernity', drawing on audiences' fascinations about a past Muslim empire and depicting Middle Eastern characters as 'heroes' instead of 'villains'. Themes around family values, courtship and romance achieve both escapism and relatability, and Berg is highly nuanced in separating-out these strands in the particularly female audience demographic. They can provide a level of emotional realism/authenticity for Qatari women audiences, a portrayal of subjects that is 'relatable but deemed taboo' and avoids the 'hypersexualisation' that audiences are saturated by in Chilean and other contexts.

Most powerfully, Berg's book exemplifies the conflicted role of popular TV dramas as forms of soft-power. On the one hand, this is about media: digital streaming platforms could be just the latest iteration of US-hegemony around popular entertainment, to which young people are particularly susceptible as consumers of the latest highest-resolution content. Yet, Berg is firm in her identification that audiences prefer their own cultural outputs, providing they are of high-enough quality, and that the sites of influence for such content is changing. (In an increasingly user-segregated world of media, one wonders what the future channels might be for those millennials currently 'passively exposed' to Turkish serial dramas 'by relatives (chiefly a mother)' watching them! (Berg, 2023: 192)). Party politics is not blind to the influence of these media forms: Berg identifies how the 'unplanned' success of serial dramas plays-into the soft-power strategies of the Turkish government. We see this trickling

down to the individual level, in which the previously analysed 'emotional realism' allows audiences 'an emotional investment and connection, not only with the serial, its characters, and its storylines, but also with Türkiye, its society, and its culture' (Berg, 2023: 112).

Berg's attention to media audience reception is therefore matched by political analysis which is as equally thrilling in the foreground as the background of her chapters. She takes classic media production processes – such as dubbing – as expressions of broader contested cultural histories. Perhaps the only unfinished thread in the conclusion and summary is just how closely the soft-power of serial dramas is tied to Turkey's hard-power, and how much autonomy cultural institutions have. Would Berg agree that 'TV industry employees have generated a separate view of Turkishness from that of the Erdoğan government' (Kaptan and Algan, 2023)? Addressing how hard and soft power interact returns us to the critique I suggested earlier: a lack of a fuller (qualitative) analysis of sentiment and emotional engagement with the dramas. Accounting for power relations under different political conditions might also require a different kind of methodological flexibility from Berg, who repeats several times in the book a rather limiting assessment that 'soft-power reveals itself qualitatively in the shift of popular opinion, rather than quantitatively'. Yet these points are minor against this highly readable and engaging work on media and politics, and I await Berg's future work with great anticipation.

Biographical Note

Kai Roland Green is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Digital Design and Information Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. Kai works primarily with arts innovation, analysing it through political economy, social entrepreneurship, and gender studies. Kai sees reviewing as an opportunity to bring a creative arts practice into dialogue with qualitative research, in unsuspecting disciplines, and his most recent review (of Elena Zanzu's circus practice) is published in *Business Ethics Quarterly* (Vol. 33, Issue 4).

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